

# Book Review: Transnationalizing the Public Sphere by Nancy Fraser et al.

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*Is Habermas' concept of the public sphere still relevant in an age of globalization, when the transnational flows of people and information have become increasingly intensive and when the nation-state can no longer be taken for granted as the natural frame for social and political debate? **Stefania Vicari** finds that this collection provide an insightful review of Habermas' classical theory, but it builds upon Nancy Fraser's original work on public spheres.*

**Transnationalizing the Public Sphere. Nancy Fraser. Kate Nash (ed.). Polity Press. April 2014.**

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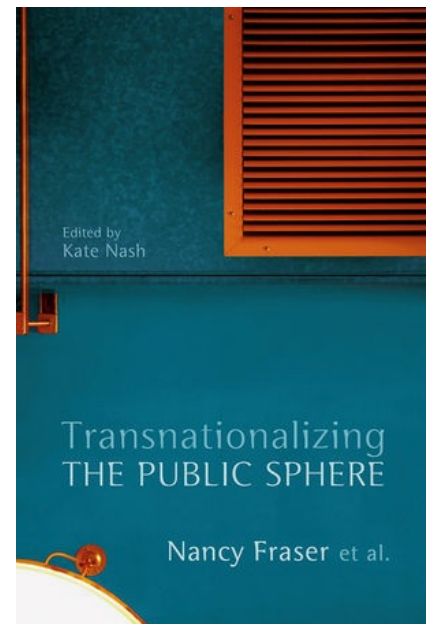
The recent anti-austerity mobilizations in many Western countries – such as Occupy Wall Street in the U.S. and the Indignados Movement in Spain – have, once again, challenged the idea that we live in just societies. Since the 2007/8 global financial crisis, thousands of people have taken to the street and occupied squares to protest against economic inequalities and austerity measures, refreshing some of the slogans used by the Global Justice Movement in the early 2000s. But can these mobilized publics truly contribute to the emergence of a transnational public sphere?

Since the 1989 English translation of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas' work has become the first yardstick against which to measure processes of democratization. While the question of whether the notion of public sphere can be applied to current societies is still open, recent cases of mobilizations in many Western countries have challenged its scope and usefulness.

*Transnationalizing the Public Sphere* addresses exactly the fundamentals of Habermas' classical theory and raises questions on its applicability to contemporary supranational processes. The book includes Nancy Fraser's 2007 title essay, along with a series of contributions that comment on Fraser's arguments.

Fraser, Professor of Political and Social Science at the [New School in New York](#), essentially asks whether the fundamentals of the classical public sphere theory are so inherently linked to the nation-state structure that they are rendered unusable for studying present political arenas. Fraser identifies six elements that are taken for granted in the Habermasian public sphere: modern state structure, territorially bounded political community, national economy, national media, and linguistic and cultural homogeneity. However, current mobilizations of public opinion go beyond national borders, they are not necessarily covered by national media, the interlocutors do not belong to a bounded political community, and targets of protest are often trans-territorial.

Fraser's central argument develops by unraveling the ideas of normative legitimacy – the possibility for “all affected” to participate in political deliberation – and political efficacy – the opportunity to constrain institutional political power. Specifically, how can we use the notion of normative legitimacy to interrogate public opinion when “all affected” no longer constitute a political citizenry? Also, how can public opinion be politically efficacious if it no longer addresses a sovereign state? The author suggests that the answers to these questions lie in the meaning of legitimacy and efficacy. The theory holds that public opinion is legitimate when *inclusive* of all affected and when realizing



*participatory parity* via giving equal access to everyone. It is efficacious when able to *translate* civil society's communicative power into binding laws and when public power has the *capacity* to implement such laws. Hence, to reconsider the meaning of public sphere in current transnational contexts we should interrogate inclusiveness, parity, translation and capacity, that is, we should first define who constitute transnational public spheres and who constitute transnational public powers.

In the second essay, Nick Couldry, Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory at LSE, suggests what I would define as a more flexible but also more functional approach to classical theory. He holds that rather than grappling with the definition of a new transnational public sphere, we should investigate how transnational processes affect public spheres at different levels of locality, leading to a trans-territorial network of discursive practices. According to Couldry, Fraser's conclusions on the infrastructural elements of classical public sphere theory – media, language and culture – overshadow the fact that these elements still retain a central role in public sphere dynamics. The author adds that, theoretically, Fraser sets the problem in a way to favour only one of its possible solutions.

The most interesting critique advanced by Couldry lies in his reading of the “all affected” principle. In Fraser's view, anyone affected by an international issue should be represented in deliberative discussions on the implementation of transnational regulations linked to that issue. However, it would be extremely difficult to form a transnational public sphere that reflects the interest of all world citizens. Couldry suggests that transnational issues could instead be pragmatically approached at the local level. Take Ken Loach's film *It's a free world*, and Polish immigration in the UK as an example. Would it not make sense if Polish immigrants could participate in discussions in the localities where they live and work? In Couldry's words: “Don't the voices of migrant workers in Britain, and indeed their families abroad that depend on their remitted income, need to be heard more in British media than at present?” (p. 55)

Kate Nash, Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths and editor of the book, centers the third chapter on Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs), primarily building on the notions of normative legitimacy and political efficacy. Regarding the former, she draws upon Habermas' *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), where the public sphere is defined in its plurality, “as made up of differentiated social spaces” (p. 62). But, says Nash, if there is no unified public sphere, how can regulations and laws be legitimate? In practice, the problem of defining a transnational public sphere does not simply lie in the impossibility to scale up the classical model from national to transnational contexts. It rather derives from the acknowledgement of the existence of different public spheres – at any level of locality – that do not necessarily lead to the production of shared consensus.

Regarding political efficacy, Nash draws attention to the role of TANs as counterpublic spheres, able to both check upon legislation and mobilize civil society. However, according to Nash, TANs' political efficacy cannot only be measured via translation and capacity, it should be looked at in terms of usefulness, or “the ability to actually make a difference” (p.75).

*Transnationalizing the Public Sphere* is a central reading for students and scholars in the fields of media and social movements. Not only does it provide an insightful review of Habermas' classical theory, but it builds upon Fraser's original work on public spheres and counterpublic spheres, central to the study of current forms of transnational mobilization and political engagement.

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